

*In the beginning the Universe was created.
This has made a lot of people very angry and has been widely regarded as a bad move.*

-- Douglas Adams

The Story So Far

John Flynn

The advent of Web 2.0 has brought me back in touch with a hundred people I've missed terribly...it is GREAT to hear from you again! And what are YOU up to?

I tried to answer that question myself, and this is the (er) director's cut, as it were.

After surviving high school life as a "Non-Mormon" in Salt Lake, I went to UC Santa Cruz just to experience the sheer cultural whiplash of moving from Right to Left at incredible speed. I double-majored in theater and the only-at-UCSC major of Modern Society and Social Thought. I did loads of fun shows on one side of campus, and studied nuclear policy on the other side of campus. I ended up playing Mephistopheles in Goethe's Faust for one senior thesis, and writing a paper on the use of emerging computer networks for organizing political action. Damn! Why did I file that one away?

Meantime, I'd become involved with Bonnie Colleen McFarlin, and much to the surprise and dismay of our families and contemporaries, we had a baby two weeks before graduation, on May 26th, 1985. Much to the delight of everyone, this baby turned out to be the adorable, friendly and irrepressible Shea Shannon McFarlin Flynn. Shea has since become something of a yardstick: my UCSC buddies always ask me how old she is, and then I can see them form this question in their heads: "What the hell have I DONE in the last TWENTY THREE YEARS?" She went to UCSC herself for several quarters, and is now working in fashion in LA.

I auditioned for a couple of graduate programs in acting, but with a new baby, MFA Acting seemed to be a dead end. Neither the schools nor I could muster much enthusiasm about each other...but I did want to keep studying. I applied for, and got, a position in the MFA Directing program at the University of Utah--home turf and a great theater program besides. Bonnie and I tried to make a go of it, but it was not to be. I have to give her a lot of credit for hanging in there and also for helping me to understand that I had to quit drinking. I did, but not before she and Shea moved back to L.A.

Utah's MFA program gave me great opportunities in terms of directing and also scholarship. It became clear to me that I wasn't just going to stop with the MFA: Dr. David Jones, my great friend and mentor at the U., engaged me to assist on indexing his masterwork, A History of Dramatic Theory. I also had a chance to work as the Dramaturge at the local Equity house, Pioneer Memorial Theater...and I did a lot of directing and fight choreography.

When I graduated in 1988, I applied to one school: UCLA. I wanted to work towards an academic/creative career, but I was going to be near Shea. Not only did I get in, but UCLA

provided me with some really interesting research and production opportunities...and I began to present and publish criticism and research. I have to admit I was not enthralled with the various postmodern modes of criticism and careerism. Alas, militating against scholarly obfuscation is really not a valid path to tenure nowadays...my current scholarship (and yes, I think of myself as a Scholar Without Portfolio) is involved with basic research on what I consider to be the most important theater company in modern America: Cornerstone Theater Company. I'm building a rather large wiki for them at cornerstone.pbwiki.com

In the early 90's I was something of a booster for Cornerstone (writing criticism supporting them online, for example), and then I started filming their work. Since then I have shot most of their productions, and then I was invited to serve on their Board, and was eventually made an Associate Artist. At roughly the same time I started a theater non-profit with a bunch of friends called Timescape Arts Group as a way to produce new work. We've done an average of one play every two-three years here in LA's massive little theater scene: the most recent was Ken Narasaki's INNOCENT WHEN YOU DREAM. I've also hooked up with the Long Beach Opera and will be doing more with them, I'm sure.

My doctoral dissertation was about the impact of Japanese theater on American performance: feel free to forget that fact right now. When I got finished with UCLA, really the day I filed my dissertation, I realized I really didn't want to follow the path I'd set out on: joining the professoriat. I was exhausted by some of the faculty members I worked with: they were incurious, clubby, and generally tiresome...I had just finished years of grad work under that crowd, did I want to start all over again as a junior faculty member? There were many great (and kind and inquisitive) teachers in that mix, but the idiots were winning at that point in the early 90's...

So I picked up another thread that was just hanging there: documentary film production.

My route there was a little circuitous: I had picked up some temp work in 1991 at the LA County Department of Mental Health. I was working on my dissertation and was done with my class work and my time as a TA, so I was working 9 to 5 as a computer consultant. I was on the job on April 29, 1992 when the verdict in the King beating trial came down...working in Koreatown I had a front-row seat for the mayhem that followed over the next few days. The following week, FEMA showed up to institute what would become the US's first wide-scale crisis counseling and community-building program in the wake of a disaster. I knew that ModSoc degree would come in handy some day! I was promoted to management (since I had both administrative and grant-writing experience), and I spent the next several years working with communities in every part of Los Angeles. My first jobs were helping to manage crisis counseling in South Central and managing the team contacting the next of kin on the Coroner's list, but before my little 4-year stint in public service was over I would work on school violence in South LA, crisis services for wildfire victims in Malibu, and crisis services for quake victims in Northridge.

In the middle of all of this, I met Risa Palley. Risa had been at UCSC (Oakes) just before I arrived, but our paths didn't cross until about two months after the riots. Two months after that we were dating, and in 1993 we became engaged. My main regret about every job since then is that Risa and I have not been co-workers...we had the best time working together, and now we

have a great marriage. I keep trying to figure out how to arrange that work/marriage thing again, but it's eluded me.

The only problem with our marriage was really the wedding night: January 16, 1994. At 4AM on the morning of the 17th, the Northridge earthquake hit. We lost our chimney, assorted glass and crockery, and so forth--luckily, all the presents were still wrapped. We still have the china. A very large contingent of family and friends were still in town and got the ride of their lives: I found them all wrapped in Ramada bed spreads, standing on the curb and trying to figure out what to do next. The following month I sent them all t-shirts I'd printed up for the occasion. They read: I SURVIVED RISA AND JOHN'S WEDDING NIGHT on the front, and on the back (beneath a graphic of a seismograph) was the question we heard over and over (and still hear): "Did the earth move for you too?"

Risa and I had new jobs that very morning: Northridge was three times the size of the LA Riots project, and our work there (and Risa's careful savings) allowed us to buy our house in Culver City. We lucked out there: we bought in 1995 just as the market was bottoming out and as Culver City was putting into gear a major refurbishment of the downtown area two blocks from our house. Culver City's now not just the home of MGM, Sony and the Culver Studios, but also a massive gallery scene, amazing restaurants, theaters, etc. Score! Shortly after we moved in, Jack (aka John Ephraim Palley Flynn) was born, followed in 1998 by Max (Max Edward Palley Flynn).

So...how does this lead to a career in documentary production? One of the clinicians working for me on the quakes was Keith Lawrence, who's had about 4 times as many careers as I have. A former child actor, he had connections all over the film industry, including the Mary Pickford Foundation (where his father was on the board). Keith asked his old friend Hugh Neely and I to form a company, and Timeline Films was born.

The focus of Timeline was usually Hollywood: biographies for Turner Classic Movies about Louise Brooks, Clara Bow, Marion Davies, and so on. Keith and I also created a documentary about the DeMille family for AMC, and I did a number of smaller projects for people in health care, for theater companies, and so on. My favorite piece as a partner at Timeline was MASTERS OF PRODUCTION, a PBS doc about production design. I have a lovely gold statue on the piano thanks to that one, and a membership in the Director's Guild of America. Alas, it turned out that neither of my partners had much business sense: Hugh could often deliver quality, but he never brought anything in on time or on budget. Keith couldn't deliver quality, and clients didn't really want to deal with him. I should have left three years before I did, but it's hard to sell off something you've built from nothing.

In the end, I went out on my own as a consultant, and teamed up with the estimable Kosh to make documentaries (btw: he is one of those Single Name People: Cher, Madonna, Kosh...). Kosh came to the US from the UK courtesy of John Lennon: he had worked as a designer at Apple Records, and like many of his countrymen he fell in love with SoCal. He did covers for Linda Ronstadt, James Taylor, ELO, the Eagles (Hotel California is his, for example), and then he just became a fixture in US rock design. When the albums shrank to CDs, he moved into TV.

Kosh, his partner Susan Shearer and I did a special on the fall of the Berlin Wall thanks to a contact Kosh had in Germany, and The History Channel decided they liked my delivery of my own writing so much that suddenly I was back in acting (of a sort). From there I went on to voice the whole DECLASSIFIED series. That was great: I got there first (since I did a lot of the interviews and most of the writing), and I also got the last stab at it (in the VO session). We also did a pilot with the comedian Lewis Black that has yet to see daylight (writing documentary jokes! yay!), and we've got a bunch of other pots bubbling. More to come, no doubt.

Somewhere in there I did a considerable amount of teaching in theater and film: UCLA, Whittier College, and (mostly) Cal State L.A. That last gig went on for about 5 years: I taught everything from undergrad theater history and grad seminars to general ed. courses for non majors and acting classes for all sorts of people. Between the MFA and Ph.D., I was qualified to teach everything but Technical Theater. Alas, when CSULA opened up a tenure track job, it went to a candidate with an affinity for post-structuralist blather. I was very disappointed about this: CSULA's student population was the most intriguing I ever worked with, and some of my students there continue to be important collaborators and colleagues.

And I also have continued my work as a consultant: my best client for the past two years has been LA County...videos, training animations, wikis, and so on. I've got a great little business there introducing new web-based technologies to folks working on all sorts of projects (mostly in health and mental health). Between communications consulting and documentary production, I've got a lot to keep me going. And in my spare time I'm doing a lot of little video art and theater projects...I've begun studying Tai Chi and I run marathons and half-marathons with the L.A. Leggers. My next ambition is to get back into fiction as best I can: I've been writing and also producing radio/podcast pieces of my stuff and others, and I've got a series I am working on too...there is always something else to turn to, always....

The motto of my company is... "In Media Res" ... a pun on "In Medias Res" meaning "In the Midst of Things."

Apt motto, that.

JJF

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